**GOVT 2305  
Section Two  
Defining Key Terms  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**  
  
We will be using lots of fancy terminology in this class, so its best that we have a good understand of these terms in order to efficiently communicate. The most important terms are government and politics.” The rest of the terms tend to fall under the scope of either of these terms.   
  
With that in mind, here’s a quick look at various definitions of the words government and politics:   
  
**What is Government?**  
  
Let us dig a bit further into the nature of government. As a reminder, these are the definition offered above  
  
1 - The institution, or institutions, with the monopoly on the legitimate use of coercion in society  
2 - The institutions and procedures through which a land and its people are ruled  
3 - A group of people that governs a community or unit. It sets and administers public policy and exercises executive, political and sovereign power through customs, institutions, and laws within a state. A government can be classified into many types--democracy, republic, monarchy, aristocracy, and dictatorship are just a few.  
  
Here’s a trivial way to approach the issue. Think about traffic rules. One of the rules we have to follow is to drive on the right hand side of the road. And we tend not to complain about that one. It makes it easier to drive from place to place without worrying about getting into head on collisions. As long as people on the road follow this simple rule, people who have never met each other can drive past each other on the same narrow strip of road and survive. The same goes for all other traffic rules. Generally traffic jams result because someone violated a rule and either got into a wreck or created a log jam of some sort. Traffic rules minimize potential disputes, they help people get along.  
  
Of course not every potential disputes can be resolved so easily. Many areas are far more controversial, and we’ll touch on some when appropriate, but in essence they are the same as the issues pose with traffic rules. A governing system allows for these disputes to be reconciled (through the political process which will be outlined below) and the resulting agreement is then imposed authoritatively.  
  
If you want to check it out on dictionary.com, [click here](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/government).  
  
**What is Sovereignty?**  
  
Government has to rest on a sovereign authority in order to function legally. Let’s take a moment to define that term:  
  
Three definitions of “[sovereignty](http://www.hawaii-nation.org/sovereignty.html)”  
1 - supreme power, especially over a body politic  
 2 - the quality of having supreme, independent authority over a territory  
 3 - the power to do everything in a state without accountability

In the U.S. we claim that sovereignty rests with the people. Of course, things get complicated after that since the people cannot directly rule – but we will dig into this later. The term effectively refers to who is in charge. The United States, we are reminded continually, is based on popular sovereignty. This is a fancy way of saying that sovereignty rests with the people and that the activities of the government have to be consented to. There are other options though – we will discuss these further below. In an oligarchy sovereignty rests with an elite group of some sort. They can be hereditary, religious, or propertied elites among other criteria. In an autocracy sovereignty rests with the single person on top of the social order. This can be a monarch, military dictator or other such person.

Here is a key controversy concerning popular sovereignty: Do the people always retain sovereignty or, once they agree to establish governing institutions and elect people to hold positions in those institutions, do they surrender that right to those people with the understanding that they can keep them in check through periodic elections? Here’s a question we will wrestle with over the course of this class: How much direct and immediate control do “the people” have over government? Is the Constitution designed to allow the people to have immediate influence over the activities of government, or is it designed to slow things down.   
  
The term sovereignty is used quite often political contexts. When we discuss conflicts between Texas and the US in upcoming sections on federalism and civil rights will point out that the Texas government often likes to accuse the national government of violating its sovereignty. We will dis

Some related blog material:   
- [sovereignty](http://theweakerparty.blogspot.com/search/label/sovereignty)   
- [state sovereign immunity](http://theweakerparty.blogspot.com/search/label/state%20sovereign%20immunity)

**The Governing Institutions: the Legislature, the Executive, and the Judiciary**  
  
We will now turn to governing institutions in order to determine what they are and what they do. This is basic material – I will assume it’s been drummed into you already. In the American system, there are three types of governing powers – the ability to pass, execute and adjudicate the law - and these three powers are vested in three types of institutions:  
  
- The [Legislative](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legislature)   
- The [Executive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_branch)  
- The [Judicial](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judiciary)

As we will see soon enough, these are the [separated powers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Separation_of_powers). James Madison argued that the concentration of these three powers in one person or institutions is the very definition of tyranny (absolute rule). We will explore this more deeply later in the section on Federalist 51.

These are, in turn, the:   
- Law Making Branches  
- Law Implementing Branches  
- Adjudicating Branches

They are generally composed of:   
- Representative Assemblies  
- Administrative Agencies  
- Independent Courts

Note the adjectives. The legislative assembly is designed to represent the will of the electorate, the executive is designed to effectively implement the decisions made by the legislature, and the judiciary is supposed to impartially adjudicate disputes over the implementation of that law. As we will see in future lectures, in the American system, these three institutions are designed to be independent from each other (the separated powers) and serve to check each other’s power in order to keep them in their proper places (the checks and balances). One of the major accomplishments of Anglo-American governance was the development of separate governing institutions with defined job descriptions and the ability to restrain each other.

The most important of these accomplishments was the ability to restrain executive power. This meant that the executive could no longer rule arbitrarily in whatever manner they choose. We will discuss this more thoroughly in the next section. We will also note that these institutions exist on the national, state and local levels. The term for this, we will discover, is federalism. The point is that the American governing system is very decentralized and very complex as well.

While each institution is held to be equal, they aren’t really. In reality, the legislative and executive branches are stronger than the judicial. This has to do with the powers each has. The Legislature possesses the power of the purse. it can impose taxes and distribute spending. The Executive possesses the power of the sword, it implements the law. In some sense, the term government in the minds of many means the executive.

This is an important point. In order to be a called a “government,” a governing entity has to be able to (1) compel individuals to follow the law and (2) to collect revenue. The executive has the power to do both, but is supposed to be restrained by the legislature and judiciary.  
  
The Judiciary is the outlier here – it has no independent power. It is only as strong as the other branches are willing to allow it to be. It has no control over the purse or the sword, apart from its ability to check the powers of the executive and legislature. Its power rests on the general perception that it is fair. Its influence depends on how fair people think its decisions are.

**Coercion and Consent**

We can establish two broad types of government based on their origin. Governments based on force, or coercion, and governments based on consent, meaning that it is based on an agreement of some sort. There’s an interesting historical and philosophical debate – dating back to the founding ear - about what factors have led t the establishment of governments. A quick qualifier is in order. Governments have to have coercive power in order to exist. They have to be able to coerce people to follow the laws and to pay taxes, which means that the two basic components of government are law enforcement and revenue collection.

Governments historically evolve due to [coercion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coercion). One group forces another to join with them, or fall under their dominion. This is the most historically accurate description about how governments evolve. Examples are numerous:   
- [Roman conquest of Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_conquest_of_Britain)  
- [Muslim conquests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_conquests)   
- [Mongol conquests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongol_conquests)   
- [Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_conquest_of_the_Aztec_Empire)

In these systems, sovereignty rests with the rulers, not the ruled. The ruled are subject to whatever the conquerors choose. These governments are kept in place through violence – of course some would argue that underlies all governing power. A government that rests on [consent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consent) derives its authority from the general population. The ruled are also the rulers. The only justification for governmental authority is the consent of the governed. American government is argued to be based on consent. Philosophically, it rests on the idea that at some point in history, a group of individuals in the [state of nature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_of_nature) joined together for mutual security and in order to better achieve group goals. To get ahead of the game, you may want to read through John Locke’s [Of the State of Nature](http://www.lonang.com/exlibris/locke/loc-202.htm). It is the basis of the argument we will look at in the [Declaration of Independence](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp).  
  
While we will dig into this document more fully soon, the following paragraph outlines this idea.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.*

As we will see in the next section, the Declaration of Independence was based on John Locke’s [Second Treatise on Government](http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Locke/second/second-frame.html) (1689), which develops the idea that man is born in a state of nature and consents to form a government for mutual security, among other reasons. The theory begins with the assumption that people are endowed with rights and argues that a government is consented to in order to secure those rights. Otherwise these rights are insecure. Others are always interested in taking your stuff. This provides a justification for the existence of government, and a general sense of what a government is supposed to do.   
  
We’ll look at this concept more when we walk through the argument in the Declaration of Independence in a couple sections.  
  
**Where is Sovereignty Located? Autocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy**

Another way we can distinguish between types of government is to ask where sovereignty is located. Another way – which we will look at next is how much individual freedom is allowed. We discussed sovereignty above. It’s a slippery term in a representative democracy, but it refers to the where the legitimate course of governing power lies.   
  
There are three possibilities: in the one, the few or the many.[[1]](#footnote-1)  
- [Autocracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autocracy) - where there is rule by the one  
- [Oligarchy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oligarchy) – Where there is rule by the few  
- [Democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy) – Where there is rule by the many

Each has advantages and disadvantages.

Autocracies are efficient, meaning they can act quickly. The fewer people needed to respond to a crisis, the more effectively it can be addressed. But the rule can also be very arbitrary. There are no rules in place that can limit the actions of government, so the autocrat can do what he or she pleases.

Oligarchies are capable, meaning that the ruling class is often composed of people who have some general skills, knowledge or ability that makes it more likely that they can rule well, but their rule can be biased. The benefits handed out by government are more likely to flow to them and those they choose to reward. Oligarchies commonly use hereditary or class distinctions to confer these advantages.

Democracies are generally considered to be legitimate by the populations they rule over, meaning that their decisions are more likely to be accepted by the general population since they see themselves as being participants in their formation, but democracies, since they are driven by a majority, prone to passion and succumb to mob violence. They have a tendency to not respect the rights of the minority, and can be as tyrannical as any other type of government. It was a Greek democracy that executed Socrates. The founders believed that they were prone to chaos and instability. Unstable Greek democracies were taken over by tyrants.

Each of these systems are incorporated into the American constitutional system. This allows for the benefits of each to be incorporated into the government, and the disadvantages of each to – hopefully - be checked by the other two.  
- Legislatures are Democratic  
- Executives are Autocratic  
- Judiciaries are Oligarchic

The (democratic) U.S. House of Representatives is composed of 435 people selected from 435 distinct districts around the country. These people are held in check with two years terms and regular elections. It is specially designed to contain within it all of the conflict one is likely to see in the country at large. It is where all the various voices in the nation are meant to be heard. The Senate is a bit less democratic since they are selected for six year terms. They were also initially selected by the state legislatures. The (autocratic) executive branch on the national level is headed by a single person in order to ensure that it has the ability to act quickly and decisively. Once laws are passed, they are to be efficiently implemented. The (oligarchic) judiciary is composed of a small set of individuals appointed to office with the intent that they be highly educated and skilled. The office is designed to give them the independence necessary to do their job without being limited by the general population.

**A little bit more on democracy . . .**

Since we identify ourselves as democratic, here’s more detail on [democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy). Let’s start with a [definition](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy): *democracy is a government in which the supreme power is* [*vested*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vest%5b1%5d) *in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free* [*elections*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/election)*.*

There are generally three components of democracy  
- Universal Adult Suffrage  
- Majority Rule  
- Minority Rights

This means that all adults should be able to vote. As we will see in a future section, the expansion of the vote occurred gradually over the course of history. The majority (or some such criteria) should make decision about public affairs. But there ought to be limits to what the majority can do in order to protect the rights of minorities. we will note in coming sections the tension between majority rule and minority rights. We will point out that democratic societies are not necessarily free. Majorities can tyrannize minorities quite easily in a democracy. We will explore the concept of [tyranny of the majority](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyranny_of_the_majority) later.   
  
There are two general types of democracy:   
- [Direct](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct_democracy) (or Pure)  
- [Indirect](http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indirect_democracy) (or Representative)

In a pure democracy, the people are able to directly vote for legislation while in a representative democracy the people vote for others who will pass laws, and then hold them accountable in periodic elections. The United States is an indirect democracy. We vote for representatives and hold them accountable. Some states (though not Texas) allow for direct democracy – referenda, initiatives, recall elections. The distinction touches on a critical issue. Democracy means rule by the people, but how closely should the people be able to rule? Should decisions be instantaneously implemented, or should there be institutions to modify their direct impact? We will note that the framers of the Constitution were not big fans of the idea that people should be able to have a quick, direct impact on the actions of government. Democracy has evolved – and continues to evolve – slowly in the United States.   
  
Here is an example of a pure, or direct, democracy: The New England [town hall meeting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town_meeting).

Were they good or bad? Decision making is kept close to the people, but passionate, unjust decisions can be made by them, and be implemented very quickly – before people can think about whether the decision was just. We will note in Federalist #10 that James Madison did not like these type of government. Others did not either:

“Alexis de Tocqueville once said that "local institutions," such as town meetings, were ‘to liberty what primary schools are to science.’“ – [WaPo](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/14/AR2009081401216.html).  
  
Here’s a famous example of unjust decisions made and implemented quickly: [The Salem Witch Trials](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salem_witch_trials). The Founders were uninterested in founding a direct – or “pure” – democracy. They believed that many of the problems they faced were caused by the excessive democracies created under the Articles of Confederation. Institutions composed of representatives should come between the people and the law. They were suspicious of democracy, and wished to establish the Constitution as a way to allow for broad participation, but check it.[[2]](#footnote-2)   
  
**How much freedom is allowed by the government? Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism, Constitutionalism**  
  
This another key way we can distinguish between types of governments is based on how much freedom they allow its citizens. We are conditioned in the United States to see individual liberty as a virtue, and we will soon notice that it is one of the principles that underlie the Constitution. While other nations share this attitude, not all due. Some nations are based on the idea that the people are subjects and should have their lives micromanaged by the state (some make that argument about the US).   
  
Here are three general terms used to refer to three types of government based on the amount of freedom the people possess.[[3]](#footnote-3)  
- [Totalitarian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Totalitarianism)  
- [Authoritarian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authoritarianism)  
- [Constitutional](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional_republic)  
  
In a totalitarian system, all power rests with the state. There is no sense of individualism as we might recognize it, but totalitarian governments are difficult and costly to sustain. The bright individual can be seen as a threat and resource are used to contain them. The most totalitarian countries tend to also be the poorest. This is a bit dated, but a 2010 Foreign Policy article walked through [the worst of the worst](http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/15/the-worst-of-the-worst-3/) at that time. This might also be worth a look: [Why Bad Guys Matter](http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/15/why-bad-guys-matter/).   
  
Authoritarian governments wish to expand their power, but tend to have to share power with other institutions in society and are unable to have total control. They are totalitarian wannabes. Argentina in the 1980s is held out to be an example because it was ruled by the military, but it had a powerful independent Catholic Church that it could not control. It would eventually provide a check on the military. This is a controversial point, but Germany’s Nazi regime gave great leeway to the large corporations in the nation that were able to develop the regime’s military muscle. As long as they did not challenge the Nazi’s politically, they enjoyed tremendous personal freedom – at least for a while.  
  
Constitutional governments – those with meaningful constitutions - have enforceable limits on the actions of government. We will walk through the nature of these restrictions in future sections, but for now simply know that there are two types of restrictions, The first is substantive, which refers to the specific things that a government cannot do. The second is procedural, which refers to the arrangement of the governing institutions and the process by which they operate. This allows for checks and balances – which is a more meaningful way to limit government. As a consequence – if well designed - individual freedom can be attained due to these limits. A constitutional system is also called a system of limited government. The others are prone to arbitrary rule. The nature of these freedoms and limitations are spelled out in a country’s constitution.  
  
Since we are on the subject: What is a Constitution?   
  
We will spend several weeks on this subject soon, but here’s a look ahead: “A [constitution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution) is a “set of rules for a government that articulate its powers and functions, and establishes its institutions, principles, structures and procedures. It also establishes its relationship with the general population by clearly stating its limits and the rights of the people.”

A Constitution does not simply limit power by stating what its institutions cannot do, but by also properly balancing the various powers within society so that no one can dominate the others. But here’s an important question:   
  
**Why value individual freedom?**   
  
Why should governments allow people to be free? What’s in it for them?   
  
There are at least two answers:   
1 – Freedom is a natural right, something that a government must protect.  
2 – There are tangible benefits to living in a free society. Wealth tends to grow in free societies.

The first is a philosophical question which we will save for next week. For now simply recall the argument in the Declaration of Independence above. It states that it is a self-evident truth that people are born with unalienable rights and that governments are established to preserve them. As for the second: Free societies tend to be wealthier than un-free societies. An independent business and academic sector can emerge and introduce new ideas that can enhance the well-being of the people and the nation.

Minimal governmental interference with business and social affairs allows for innovation and development.   
There tends to be a [positive relationship](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_in_the_World_(report)) between freedom and national wealth, as well as the quality of life enjoyed by the population.  
  
Here’s input from a couple writers you should become familiar with:   
  
[Adam Smith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Smith) argued that free markets promoted the general welfare by unleashing the productive power and the ingenuity of individuals within society. He wrote these thoughts out in [The Wealth of Nations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wealth_of_Nations).

[John Stuart Mill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stuart_Mill) argued that free speech did the same. People should be free to challenge orthodox beliefs – scientific beliefs for example - since that allows societies to swap error for truth. And even if it turns out that the orthodox belief that was challenged is reaffirmed, we come away with a greater understanding of it as a consequence of the challenge.   
  
Freedom and Politics  
  
Here’s a depressing thought. In nations where individual freedom is valued, people are able engage in a variety of activities according to their choices and preferences. While limits exist in some areas, people are generally free to engage in whatever business activities they choose, study what they wish, behave as they choose, and worship – or not – as they want. People can also believe what they want.   
  
This means that people start to develop their own interest and opinion. Free societies also allow people to act on those beliefs as well. This means that they can speak about them, organize groups to promote them, vote for people for public office that support them – assuming that they cannot vote for them directly – and they can also run for office if they choose.   
  
This means that they can become involved in politics.   
  
Now let’s turn to that term:   
  
**What is Politics?**  
  
Here are four, of the many, definitions of “Politics”  
  
1- The authoritative allocation of values in society.  
2 - The struggle over who gets what, when, and how.  
3 - Intrigue or maneuvering within a political unit in order to gain control or power  
4 - The art of what’s possible.

If you want to check it out on dictionary.com[, click here](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/politics?s=t).  
  
“Politics” has a distinct meaning, than “government.” The latter refers to the institutions that have authority over the people in a defined region. Politics concerns the struggle over determining what governments do. What types of laws are passed by the legislature? How will they be implemented and how will adjudication over disputes raised by them be handled? The first two definitions above point out that this struggle is often over two types of conflict in society: that over values and interests.   
  
**Values and Interests**  
  
The word “values” can be defined as a sense of what is right and wrong, and whether a government has the authority to address it. Here’s a fancier definition: *the ideals, customs, institutions, etc., of a society toward which the people of the group have an affective regard. These values may be positive, as cleanliness, freedom, or education, or negative, as cruelty, crime, or blasphemy.* – dictionary.com.  
  
Examples are easily found. Open up a random news oriented web site. Should abortion be legal? Or same-sex marriage? Since the U.S. was based on a set of governing principles articulated in founding documents, certain values are held to be distinctly American and are common in political disputes over the passage of laws and in the campaign for public office. The list of values should sound familiar. They include:   
  
- Natural Rights  
- Individual Liberty  
- Equality of Opportunity  
- Self Sufficiency  
- Self Government  
- Community

Some of these are in conflict. For examples, we can’t be both free and equal. Free societies – which allow people to pursue their own goals and objectives – can allow some to become more prosperous than others, which violates the principle of equality. Societies which prioritize equality can place limits on people to accumulate wealth are in turn argued to violate the principle of individual freedom. The same is true with individualism and communitarianism. The idea that policies ought to prioritize the ability of individuals to pursue their own goals without regard to other violates the principle of communitarianism that some argue is central to the need to develop social bonds, and vice versa.  
  
In GOVT 2306 we will approach this question in a different way, one that takes into consideration the different political cultures that exist around the nation – and also help us understand the nature of the political conflict common between the states. These are the following:   
- moralistic   
- individualistic  
- traditionalistic  
  
Disputes over values have led to the development of broad ideological movements organized around these disputes. The same is true for interests.

Interests can be defines as the tangible benefits one receives from government. Here’s an official definition: *regard for one's own advantage or profit; self-interest: The partnership dissolved because of their conflicting interests*. – dictionary.com

Think of the struggle over where tax rates are set, which industries are subsidized, what regulations are set, and where spending is focused. You may be familiar with the ongoing conflict regarding funding for higher education. How much should be funded collectively through tax dollars? How much should be funded out of your pocket? Should student loans be made available to you? At what rates?

According to James Madison, conflict over interests are inevitable, and groups will always form around those interests. He called these groups factions. We call them interest groups. He suggested they are inevitable in a developed society that allows people to pursue their own interests. From Federalist #10: *A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.*  
  
As we will see in future sections, the framers of the Constitution took these factors into consideration and used the Constitution’s design as a way to condition how these groups affect governance. Conflict over values and interests involve huge political fights and a variety of organizations have developed in America to conduct those fights. These are properly called political institutions, since they attempt to influence the decisions of government. These are three dominant types of institutions.  
  
**The Political Institutions: Political Parties, Interest Groups, the Press**

As suggested further above, free societies allow for political participation, which includes the ability of people to form groups in order to influence governing institutions. Each are external forces (though political parties have worked their way into the operations of Congress) on government that allow those not in power to have an influence on government, and those in power to consolidate control. . There are three broad categories of these groups. We will investigate each more thoroughly later in the semester.  
  
- [Political Parties](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_party): A group of individuals that have organized around shared political principles with the intent of winning elections to governmental office and organizing governing institutions once in power.  
  
- [Interest Groups](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advocacy_group): An organization that seeks to influence political decisions often by lobbying elected leaders directly and becoming active in elections.  
  
- The Press: Organizations with the technology and audience to disseminate information. These can include [the media](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_media) and [public relations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_relations) firms among others.  
  
**Public Opinion**  
  
In a democracy, the most important political force on government is [public opinion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_opinion). Public opinion directly impacts elections and plays a principle role in determining the types of laws that will be passed by Congress.   
Here is a definition: the prevailing and widespread belief of the majority of people in a society about a given subject or issue.  
  
As we will see later this semester, there are a couple ways to look at public opinion – at least. One is the prevailing attitude that exists generally among a group of people, the other is the measurement of the opinion by a public opinion pollster. This is a tricky thing to do.

**Ideology: Conservatism and Liberalism**

A key question investigated by political scientists: Why do people take the positions they do? We will explore this in future sections, but for now it’s worth pointing out that people sometimes use ideological frameworks to make those decisions. By adopting an ideological label people are both able to make more sense of the political world by determining what information they choose to accept and what positions to take on political questions. By doing so, ideologies help make the vast range of political information easier to process, understand, and respond to. Here is a simple definition of political ideology:   
  
A set of positions on issues that are based on a fundamental value.

There are two dominant ideologies in contemporary politics  
- [Conservatism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatism)  
- [Liberalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism_in_the_United_States)  
  
The more one prioritizes freedom, the more one is likely to be conservative. The more one prioritizes equality, the more one is likely to be liberal.  
  
Here’s a little bit on each:   
  
Conservatism, historically, is based on support for tradition, the status quo, and the preservation of privilege. More recently also focused on individual liberty. It tends to prefer private solutions over public ones, and if a solution is to be solved through the public sector, smaller levels of government preferred over larger. The most important historical figure for conservatives is: Edmund Burke.

Liberalism, historically, has been oriented towards reform and the liberation of lower classes, this makes it more supportive of the values of equality. Liberals support for anti-poverty and civil rights policies, and tend to prefer governmental solutions over private sector solutions. They also tend to support expansions of political participation.

Neither is thoroughly cohesive. Disputes exist within each. Few people are completely conservative or completely liberal. Most people in the United States call themselves moderate, rather than liberal or conservative. If you’d like to take a brief test to see where you fit, click here: [Where do you fit](http://typology.people-press.org/typology/)?

Here are a few areas of dispute between liberalism and conservatism.

Traditionalism vs. Reform  
- Conservatives argue that traditional relationships (think: heterosexual marriage) provide stability for a society and that these should not be radically changed. Liberals argue that these relationships should be modified to comply with changing morays of society.

Religion  
- Conservatives historically have supported the promotion of Protestantism and the display of Protestant images in public buildings, thought these have been recently expanded to include Catholicism and Judaism. Liberals are more supportive of a secular approach to government (the wall of separation), restrictions of religious imagery and inclusion of Islam, Hinduism and other religions in their understanding of religion.

The Free Market  
- Conservatives support free markets (or more appropriately [laissez-faire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laissez-faire) markets), with minimal intervention by government, except to promote and enhance the marketplace. Liberals are more willing to allow government to provide, or subsidize, certain services that would not otherwise be provided by the market, such as Social Security and Medicare.

Regulations  
- Conservatives argue that private industry can regulate itself and there is no need for regulatory agencies, which only suppress competition and inhibit innovation. Liberals argue that regulatory agencies are necessary to curb corruption, ensure fair, open transactions, and limit externalities like pollution.

The Military v. Diplomacy  
- Conservatives believe in a large military and believe the use of the military should be based on the sole interests of the United States with little regard for those of other countries (unilateralism). Liberals believe the military should be smaller, the use military power should be coordinated with other countries (multilateralism), and diplomacy and development are just as important as defense.

Civil Rights  
- Conservatives are usually opposed to civil rights measures since they disrupt the status quo and create opportunities for certain groups to sue for grievances. This is especially true for affirmative action. Liberals see civil rights as necessary to overcome long standing denials of equal protection.

Law Enforcement  
- Conservatives tend to take a hard line on law enforcement and oppose measures, even constitutional measures, that enhance the rights of criminal defendants. Liberals argue for the rights of criminal defendants and often support additional funding for public defendants.

Interpreting the Constitution  
- Conservatives usually argue for limited interpretations of constitutional language while liberals support loose interpretations. Looser interpretations tend to allow for additional national power.  
  
For more, here are some useful links:   
- [A list of policial ideologies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_ideologies).  
- [Nolan Chart](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nolan_chart).  
- [Political Spectrum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_spectrum).  
- For Fun: [A quiz on ideology](http://www.gotoquiz.com/what_is_your_political_ideology).  
- [And here’s another](http://www.allthetests.com/quiz08/dasquiztd.php3?testid=1084953797).

**What Governments Do - Public Policy**  
  
The simplest way to describe public policy is to say that it is what government decides to do. It can involve big things – like the decision to go to war – or little things, like figuring out how big sign can be outside businesses. It is the most obvious manifestation of government.  
  
Here are two more official definitions of it:

1 - Public policy is a course of action adopted and pursued by a government.   
2 - Public policy is a purposive and consistent course of action produced as a response to a perceived problem of a constituency, formulated by a specific political process, and adopted, implemented, and enforced by a public agency. [*- click here for the source.*](http://profwork.org/pp/study/define.html)

Directly or indirectly, we will discuss public policies in most sections of this class. When we cover federalism, for example, we will look at the ongoing struggle over determining which level of government is best able to implement which public policies. In a federal system, some policies are more likely to be dealt with at the national level, and other at the state level. When we discuss the Constitution and Federalism, we will note that it granted to Congress the ability to pass laws on economic and military policies. The executive was given latitude to make decisions on foreign policy, but circumstances over history has led to the expansion of national power, and public policy in many areas is now shared with the states. We will cover this shift over the course of the class and give special attention to certain public policies, notably foreign and economic.  
  
Later in the semester, after we review governmental and political institutions, we will discuss three key areas of public policy, as well as the concept of a policy arena and the public policy process. The three areas of public policy we will cover are:

1 - Foreign Policy: The set of actions designed to ensure that America’s interests are met in our relations with other nations.

2 - Economic Policy: The set of actions designed to ensure to ensure that the economy grows and prospers.  
  
3 - Social Welfare Policy: The set of actions designed to improve the standard of living, as well as address issues such as poverty.  
  
There are many more, but most of these will be discussed in 2306 when we focus specifically on state and local government and politics. Battles are fought – ideological, partisan, regional – over exactly what these policies look like and who benefits the most from them. Its easy to agree that America should be, for example, be energy independent. It is more difficult to agree on how that is best achieved. In a federal system, some policies are more likely to be dealt with at the national level, and other at the state level. When we discuss the Constitution and Federalism, we will note that it granted to Congress the ability to pass laws on economic and military policies. The executive was given latitude to make decisions on foreign policy. But circumstances over history has led to the expansion of national power, and public policy in many areas is now shared with the states. We will cover this shift over the course of the class and give special attention to certain public policies, notably foreign and economic. **How Government Really Works: Sub Governments, Iron Triangles, and Issue Networks**  
  
Despites the fact that we will be discussing the governing and political institutions separately, it is important to keep in mind that they work in tandem as networks. The terms above have been developed to describe the nature of these relationships. For our purposes the best one to look at is the iron triangle because it describes a precise relationship that has been argued to evolve between three institutions all involved in a specific area of public policy.

These are interest groups, congressional committees, and executive agencies. If the interest group is strong enough to influence elections to congress and the appointment of executive officials, they can effectively regulate themselves.

Examples abound, but a commonly described network involves the [Securities and Exchange Commission](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Securities_and_Exchange_Commission) and finance committees in both the House and Senate are commonly argued to have been [captured](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/07/sec-takes-lighttouch-appr_n_846289.html) by the [financial sector](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial_services). Critics wonder whether this is why no serious investigations have been made by the SEC of the banks role in the 2008 crash. Its often pointed out that a [revolving door](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolving_door_(politics)) exists between people that work in governmental agencies, congressional offices, and interest groups. These are the people that may really run things.  
  
For more:   
- [Iron Triangles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_triangle_(US_politics))  
- [Issue Networks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Issue_network)

1. The Ancient Greeks argued that history cycled through these types of government. [Click here for the Wikipedia on Kyklos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyklos). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. - [History of Town Meeting in New England](http://www.suite101.com/content/history-of-town-meeting-a122942).  
   - [Click here for quotes regarding the excesses of democracy](http://lexrex.com/enlightened/AmericanIdeal/yardstick/pr12.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For More: [Democracy Index 2015 Democracy in an age of anxiety](http://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=DemocracyIndex2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)